

ON MINA SHUM'S DOUBLE HAPPINESS

by Andrea Dorfman

Curatorial essay accompanying the Cinema Lounge: Andrea Dorfman on Mina Shum's Double Happiness program screened at the Winnipeg Film Group's Cinematheque on May 8, 2009

In 1994 I was a student at the Nova Scotia College of Art in Halifax, Nova Scotia taking an eclectic assortment of classes with dubious names. My parents were very concerned that 'performance art' wasn't going to lead to a career. The thing is, I was most interested in taking film classes but because the school's film department only consisted of two classes - one super8 and one 16mm held at the Atlantic Filmmaker's Co-op across town - by the end of my first year, I had already taken them both. As long as I could remember, I had loved films and was fascinated with how they were made. No other art form filled me up, inspired me or made me feel more satisfied than the art of filmmaking. I had taken pictures and made super 8 films since I was a kid and becoming a director was a secret fantasy. Secret because I had no idea how to become a film director – although I knew I would need to know a lot more than what two classes could provide – and there were very few women feature filmmakers back then (not that there are many more now...).

When *Double Happiness* came to Halifax, I was the first in line to see it. I had heard about Mina Shum: the talented young filmmaker from Vancouver who audaciously made a feature film that made a big splash on the film festival circuit. I watched the film with a packed audience and from the moment the colourful, storybook title credits unfurled across the screen, I was in love. By the end of the film, I was fulfilled by watching a fantastic film and completely inspired to follow my dreams as a filmmaker. Following dreams is what *Double Happiness* is about.

Jade Li (Sandra Oh) is a head strong twenty-something who dreams of becoming the next Marilyn Munro while her traditionalist parents look on with disapproval. *Double Happiness* covers the familiar coming-of-age territory where in order to fulfill ones own personal happiness the protagonist needs to make a break from her parents. Jade's conflict is heightened by the fact that she is Chinese-Canadian, the daughter of hard working immigrants who would rather she choose a more sensible career and perhaps even marry a doctor. As the story unfolds, Jade meets a cute academic (Callum Keith Rennie) at a bar and has a one night stand that blossoms into a full-on crush; she attends auditions, struggling with her place in a world of racial type-casting and she clashes with her parents at every turn. All of this happens in front of the backdrop of the looming threat that if Jade fulfills her destiny, she might follow in the footsteps of her brother who is now disowned by his parents. The film hurtles towards an inevitable battle when Jade finally has to choose whether or not to realize her parents' vision of her life or her own. It's an intersection that everyone feels at some point in their lives but it's particularly agonizing for parents whose children want to become artists. No parent wants their child to live a life of poverty...no matter how much

their kid tells them they love eating lentil-based meals off of milk crate tables. At the film's conclusion, Shum writes an ending that is both satisfying and unexpected. We are grateful that Jade is going to fulfill her dreams but sorry for the pain she had to deliver her parents in the process.

I saw *Double Happiness* at the perfect time. My parents' concerns were starting to wear me down I was wondering if I shouldn't start to think about a 'real job' instead of becoming an artist and a filmmaker. And then I met Jade Li. *Double Happiness* is about the impossible task of having piss off our parents in order to become the people we need to become. We all want approval from our parents and it seems so unjust, so ironic that we have to go against this natural urge to please – a pleasure that started when they delighted in our first steps – so we can grow up. It takes incredible courage, especially if the stakes are high, as they are in Jade's situation. In order to embrace her future she had to, literally, break up with her family. At the centre of *Double Happiness* is a captivating performance by the ever-talented Sandra Oh. Her honesty and strength make us champion her and her mischeviousness make us fall in love with her. Every great film is carried by a fantastic protagonist and Shum created and cast the perfect lead with Oh as Jade. We utterly believe and champion Jade when she tells us that she is going to win the Academy Award one day. How prophetic is that?!

Another reason why *Double Happiness* came to me at an important time in my own trajectory was that I was always interested in personal stories but wondered if there was a place for them in feature filmmaking. Were personal stories worthy? Shum's film made me feel that there most certainly was a place for autobiographically inspired films. I remember reading every interview I could find where Shum described her passion, her dedication and her own story that ended with the making of *Double Happiness*. She was an important role model who came along at a pivotal time in my life. I was grateful for all of the filmmakers like Mina Shum and films like *Double Happiness* that remind me that personal stories have legs; that they resonate in real and important ways, reaching out to audience members, connecting with them.

I also want to take note of the film's design and tone which have always left a lasting impression. To me, the greatest films, films that have stood the test of time, have a strong sense of place, visual style and tone. I wonder if Canadian films often suffer in this department. It seems as though filmmakers are often not pushing their vision far enough so that it explodes on the screen. *Double Happiness* is one of the few Canadian films that accomplished this. Whether it is the surprising lazy susan shot at the beginning of the film or Oh's direct addressing the camera, the audience takes delight in Shum's style without being thrown out of the film because it's over the top. *Double Happiness* is a grounded film that sparkles.

With a debut film like *Double Happiness*, Mina Shum was definitely a 'director to be watched'. Shum demonstrated that she was a filmmaker with something to say. A director with a voice. In my mind, she is someone who should

be making a film every couple of years - with an increasingly adequate budget. Although she has made two feature films since *Double Happiness - Drive She Said* (1997) and *Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity* (2002) - I feel it's a shame she hasn't she made more films in the past fifteen years. I suspect this is because, although things are slowly changing, we aren't at a time yet where female filmmakers can enjoy careers like Cronenberg, Egoyan, MacDonald or Arcand. Curious to find out what she was up to these days, I tracked Shum down and was happy to discover that she has three features at various stages of development/ I asked her if her feelings of film had changed over the years, why she still makes films and she wrote over email,

"For me, my love of filmmaking stems from being in awe of it's capabilities to transform a person. Filmmaking has such power to me as a viewer and as a filmmaker, I get to play in all the areas I love from story to visual to music and sound design. The art form kind of completes me, as it gets all those thoughts I have roaming around in my head and find a focus for it. When I'm writing or making a film, I am in love and when I'm not, I'm lonely".

I agree whole heartedly.

My Halifax art school days long behind me, I too am living the challenging, rewarding, wonderful and uncertain life as a filmmaker. The other night I settled into a cozy chair and had the pleasure of watching *Double Happiness* again for the first time in fifteen years. It was an absolute thrill to see that it again and to see that it withstood the test of time. I would venture to say that *Double Happiness* is a Canadian Classic. I was most grateful was to spend a little time with Jade Li again. Jade is someone who will find success in life because she knows that happiness will come from following your heart and, to Jade, happiness is success. Something that we need to remind of ourselves over and over throughout our lives.